COLLABORATIVE work planning

Supervisors often use a collaborative or participative approach in creating work plans with their employees. This approach is especially appropriate when employees are engaged in project work and when they have responsibilities distinct from one another, rather than all performing the same tasks.

Using a collaborative approach can have the advantage of enhancing employees' engagement in their work (because they are involved in setting their own expectations), as well as producing expectations that are more relevant than if the supervisor had established expectations unilaterally (because employees are, in many cases, more familiar with the details of their work than are their supervisors).

The downside of collaborative work planning is that the supervisor and employee are coming to the discussion from different perspectives. Thus, disagreements often arise about the details of the work plan. Ask-tell-merge (ATM) is a negotiation model that provides a way for supervisors and employees to understand the differences between their separate views and to merge them. The model encourages two-way communication and minimizes confrontations in goal setting discussions.

ASK-tell-merge

Using the ATM approach, supervisors **ask** for the employee's viewpoint, **tell** the employee their own, and then **merge** the two views:

- Ask – Ask for the employee's view. Ask questions. Restate, in your own words, what the employee has said. The employee will confirm that you understood or will let you know that you have misunderstood.

- Tell – Explain your viewpoint. Confirm that the employee understood. This can be done by either asking a question or having the employee restate what you said.

- Merge – Use the following merge techniques to resolve differences between your views and the employee's views:

Type of Merge	Examples
Agree – You agree with the employee's viewpoint or the employee agrees with yours.	• "You're right. We left out a measure of customer satisfaction. Let's add it."
Create – You and the employee create a totally new alternative that both of you can agree to.	• "I wanted you to handle the customers' problems during their call, and you'd like the flexibility of handling them within an hour after the call. Now we've agreed that you'll ask customers when they need an answer by, and then you'll meet that mutually agreed-upon deadline."
Meet – You and your employee meet on a viewpoint some where between yours and the employee's.	• "You'd like to aim for 45 and I'd like the standard to be 25. We both can agree on 30-35 for the next six months. Then we'll renegotiate."
Impose – You set the standard and require the employee to agree with your viewpoint.	• "OSHA rules say that goggles and ear protectors must be worn in these circumstances. So that has to be one of the things I expect from you." • "The department budget for this project is $10,000, and so you have to have the same standard."

When conducting the performance planning discussion, repeat the ATM for each goal. By doing so, you will maximize the employee's involvement, buy-in and commitment.

COMMON problems and their solutions

Here are some types of problems supervisors often encounter when they sit down with their employees to create work plans:

Problem	Example	Solution
Results expectations are actually tasks disguised as results expectations.	• "Hold kickoff meeting by 9/1" • "Meet with 15 clients per week" • "Review documentation for errors"	Ask, "If the kickoff meeting is successful, what will the result be, or what value will that add?" Then, measure that result. For example: • The kickoff meeting should lead to "buy-in to the new project." Thus, the results expectations might be, "10-15 locations volunteering to pilot the program." • "Meeting with 15 clients" is pure process. What is expected to come out of those meetings? Why are the meetings conducted?
Results expectations are too big or too long range.	• "Make the division financially self-sustaining within 5 years."	When a goal is too large and/or too far in the future to offer practical guidance on a near-term basis, identify interim goals that specify progress toward the longer-range goal. For example: • Achieving "$X revenue and $Y expenses by the end of the current year" could be an effective interim goal.
Results expectations are actually competencies or values disguised as results expectations.	• Setting a result expectation of "improving teamwork" while simultaneously evaluating a competency called "teamwork."	• Decide which is more important, the end-result or the way of achieving the result. If the result is more important, set results expectations for it. If the way of achieving the result is more important, evaluate only the competency or value and drop the results expectation.
Too many results expectations.	• List of 25 results expectations.	• Prioritize the employee's expectations in terms of their effect on the organization and their alignment with your expectations and higher-level, agency goals. Drop the low-priority results expectations. • Combine expectations with similar intent.

Problem	Example	Solution
Measures are not practical to track.	• "Answer the phone prior to the third ring." • "No typos on any documents."	• Sample the work. • Switch to exception reporting where the two examples become "No complaints due to unanswered phones or errors in documents." • Drop the expectation.
Vague or unverifiable targets.	• "Do a good quality job." • "Improve customer satisfaction."	Identify numeric measures and goals or switch to a verifiable descriptive measure. For instance: • "Improve customer satisfaction" could become "Score 3.5 to 4.0 on customer satisfaction survey" or "Customers say they are willing to recommend our service to citizens who are similarly situated."

2/25/08